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File

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
MEMORANDUM:

SUMMARY

Venezuela's fragile experiment with constitutional democracy now is undergoing perhaps its severest test. President Betancourt is preparing the country for critical elections in the face of a terroristic challenge from the extreme left and under pressure from a restive military establishment. After months of temporizing, he has begun a crackdown on terrorists, an action that has reassured the military.

We believe that Betancourt will survive the present crisis with little if any diminution of his presidential powers vis-a-vis the military. Much, of course, will depend on the course of the campaign against the terrorists. Even should the campaign go badly and sentiment within the military for a coup increase, the military probably would attempt to preserve the guise of constitutionality by seeking to share political power with Betancourt. There also is a danger that the crackdown on the terrorists may force a delay in the elections and possibly evoke a boycott by the opposition parties.

The continuing problem of an elected successor to Betancourt--probably lacking his considerable political assets--will be that of survival in office amidst the harshly disruptive forces of Venezuelan politics. The military will continue to be the key to survival of constitutional government. Should the election returns be close and disputed by the losers, or should the new president prove unable to form an effective government, the chances of a military takeover would increase.

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